

Prohibit "tollbooths" on cyber-highway - August 6, 2006

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Rep. Slaughter

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In recent years, the internet has become instrumental to both our global economy and our political system by leveling the playing field in a way that no other medium ever has. Entrepreneurs are able to affordably promote their services and develop their businesses, students and scholars can share new research with one another from across the globe, and activists have a forum to exchange ideas and mobilize like never before. However, as the internet expands, there is serious concern that big corporations could pay huge fees for their websites to load more quickly than those of their competitors, effectively boxing out small businesses. The true marketplace of ideas that embodies today's internet would be a thing of the past.

During recent deliberations on proposals to reform our nation's telecommunications laws, I worked with my colleagues to make sure new legislation preserved the endless promise of the internet. To keep the infinite network of information flowing, I voted in favor of an amendment to ensure "net neutrality," which would protect the internet by ensuring that businesses and ideas will continue to compete based on their merits, not their wealth. Net neutrality would keep the internet equally open for all people and businesses. Unfortunately, the Republican majority failed to pass this net neutrality amendment, despite the strong support of groups ranging from MoveOn.org to the Christian Coalition to the Gun Owners of America.

While I commend our local internet providers for their contributions to expanding access to the internet, I worry that imposing fees on internet start-ups and small businesses to carry their content would unfairly stifle innovation and competition. So far, the internet has been a new frontier in the American economy, where individuals can compete on equal footing with big corporations. Can we afford to make the information freeway a toll road, where corporations able to pay high fees would put their websites in the express lane, leaving innovators, scholars, and activists stuck in a traffic jam?

As we all learned in Economics 101, competition breeds innovation and progress. That concept serves as the very foundation of our economic system. For instance, imagine the advances that would never have been realized had the two Stanford college buddies that invented Google been priced out of putting their now-famous search engine online. This multi-billion dollar organization helps fuel our economy and has changed the way we do research. We no longer spend hours thumbing through card catalogs at the library. Instead, we spend seconds "Googling" at home.

Beyond advancing research and the economy, the internet has the power to facilitate political discourse and bring grassroots activists together. In America's formative years, politics were frequently discussed in taverns or the town square, contributing greatly to our success as a democracy. However, these options aren't really feasible for Americans today. The internet is our new town hall meeting, and has the potential to bring voters together to discuss information and ideas, increasing their political agency and maintaining an informed electorate. This new political tool is not one we should give up lightly.

We as a society have to make a choice. What kind of internet would we like to see five years from now? America is in a fight to keep its advantage in scientific, medical, and technological research. Hardworking men and women across the country are struggling to get by given recent job losses, and many are going into business for themselves. I and many of my Democratic colleagues believe that without an open internet, our economy, our creativity, and our democracy itself would suffer greatly. We will continue to protect the needs of American consumers and small businesses by advocating net neutrality legislation. Through it, we can preserve the internet's true and unrestricted nature.